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# The Ambiguous Oracle: Narrative Configuration in Acts

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This paper outlines the way in which a plot-device, which for the sake of convenience we shall call the ‘ambiguous oracle’ in Acts 1.6–8, controls and influences the narrative, creating coherence and enabling interpretation. The paper begins by looking at the current interpretation of the verses, and argues that it is not sufficient to explain the narrative configuration at various points, before going on to suggest an alternative interpretation, in which the misinterpretation of the oracle by the Apostles leads to the fulfillment of the Divine will. This interpretation finds strong support in literature contemporary to Acts.

**Keywords:** ambiguous oracle, Jewish mission, Paul, Acts, narrative configuration

## 1. The Oracle and the Plot

### 1.1. *The Outline of the Plot: 1.6–8*

Οἱ μὲν οὖν συνελθόντες ἡρώτων αὐτὸν λέγοντες· κύριε, εἰ ἐν τῷ χρόνῳ τούτῳ ἀποκαθιστάνεις τὴν βασιλείαν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ; ἔειπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτούς· οὐχ ὑμῶν ἐστὶν γινῶναι χρόνους ἢ καιροὺς οὓς ὁ πατὴρ ἔθετο ἐν τῇ ἰδίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ, <sup>8</sup>ἀλλὰ λήμψεσθε δύναμιν ἐπελθόντος τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς καὶ ἔσεσθέ μου μάρτυρες ἐν τε Ἱερουσαλὴμ καὶ [ἐν] πάσῃ τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ καὶ Σαμαρείᾳ καὶ ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς.

Of these verses, 1.8 is generally considered to be the pivotal verse for the outline of Acts,<sup>1</sup> with various interpretations of 1.6–7. Tannehill, for example, argues that these verses are important in recognising the continuing problem created by Israel’s rejection of the Gospel. He claims 1.6 is

a further expression that has already been expressed in Luke. Indeed, the restored reign for Israel is simply another expression of the hope that

530 1 See, for example, Mikeal Carl Parsons, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 20.

Gabriel, a messenger with divine authority, aroused in Luke 1.32–33. The narrative does not allow us to forget about this hope now that its fulfilment is becoming problematic through the rejection of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

Such a view depends heavily on unity with Luke's Gospel, and demands an interpretation of continuing hope for Israel throughout Acts,<sup>3</sup> and yet does not fully explain the literary purpose of the verse. Tannehill is right to observe that hopes for Israel are problematised significantly in Acts, but if 1.6 simply reminds the reader of hopes raised in Luke 1.32–33 and 2.32, it begs the question as to how readers made sense of it in the context of all the Jewish rejection and persecution that goes on throughout the Acts narrative.

Pervo, whose approach to the problem of unity is somewhat more agnostic, sees the disciples' question as merely a platform upon which to have Jesus make an important statement, outlining his view on the correct attitude to the problem of Israel before going on to map out the course of the evangelical mission.<sup>4</sup> But if the question asked in 1.6 is merely a vehicle for Jesus to outline his plans, it is an odd one. It seems a striking sort of question, because it impinges upon a central theme of Acts (and as far as is known, early Christianity in general)—that of the Jews and their salvation. So whether one interprets along the lines of Tannehill, who recognises the importance of this statement but does not explain how it coheres with the narrative, or of Pervo, who underplays the statement's importance to Acts and early Christianity but recognises it as having a literary function, 1.6–8 operates as two distinct entities—Jesus brushes off the question of Israel before addressing the universal mission.

Another scholar who has pursued the line of literary parallels for these verses is J. Bradley Chance, who compares Acts to Xenophon of Ephesus's *Ephesian Tale*, and observes that 'divine prophecy' in the beginning of each text plays an important role in the development of both plots. Xenophon's oracle runs as follows:

Why do you long to discover the end and the start of their illness?  
Both are in thrall to one illness, and thence must the cure be accomplished.  
Terrible their sufferings which I can foresee and toils neverending.  
Both will take flight o'er the sea pursued by a frenzy of madness.  
Chains will they bear at the hands of men who consort with the ocean,  
And one tomb and annihilating fire will be their nuptial bower.  
Yet in time, when their sufferings are over, a happier fate is in store.<sup>5</sup>

2 Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke–Acts: A Literary Interpretation*. Vol. 2. *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 15.

3 Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, 2.3.

4 Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (ed. Harold W. Attridge; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 41.

5 1.6. This translation: Longus and Xenophon of Ephesus, *Daphnis and Chloe, Anthia and Habrocomes* (ed. and trans. Jeffrey Henderson; LCL 69; London: Harvard University, 2009) 227.

There is no need to go into the details of his analysis here, as his observations are unproblematic:

Thus, interpretation of the oracle itself contributes to the development of the story line in Xenophon. It was interpretation of the oracle which led the fathers to marry the children and to send them on the sea voyage which would eventually bring about the many adventures of the couple. Further, reflection on the oracle leads the lovers to anticipate separation and to vow fidelity. While this vow does not in itself create the adventures to come, it infuses them with a certain tension and pathos which would not otherwise be present.<sup>6</sup>

Chance compares this to Acts, and asks:

Do we find the characters reflecting upon and interpreting this feature of the prophecy and, in response to their own interpretations, making decisions and taking steps that move the plot along? The short answer is 'No'.

For Chance this represents a fundamental difference between Luke and Xenophon:

For Luke, divine guidance cannot be reduced to a plot device, as much as it may contribute to plot. The guiding hand of God lies at the centre of Luke's view of the movement of *history*, not only the movement of *story*.<sup>7</sup>

This conclusion, which implicitly privileges the importance of the history genre, suggests that because Luke is telling an historical story he has different aims and objectives to Xenophon, and these are discernible when we read the text because of particular narrative elements and the way they are used. Though there is certainly some merit in this view of the differences between fictional and historical literature, the problem of distinguishing between the two is rather more complex than Chance allows here.<sup>8</sup> In terms of genre, it is evident

6 J. Bradley Chance, 'Divine Prognostications and the Movement of Story: An Intertextual Exploration of Xenophon's Ephesian Tale and the Acts of the Apostles', *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (ed. Ronald F. Hock, J. Bradley Chance, and Judith Perkins; SBLSymS; Atlanta: Scholars, 1998) 222.

7 Chance, 'Divine Prognostications', 234.

8 The issue is vastly complicated, and has vexed literary theorists for some time. Richard Walsh, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2007), represents a recent and very solid approach to the problem; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985) 23–35, provides a very fruitful discussion focusing on the specifically biblical elements; Kalle Pihlainen, 'The Moral of the Historical Story: Textual Differences in Fact and Fiction', *New Literary History* 33.1 (2002) 39–60, makes some important general observations but admits they would not suffice for a strict distinction;

that no single device can ever be considered a decisive indicator—the danger of subversion or adoption by other genres is simply too high. It might be said, however, that a high correlation of certain devices indicates a particular generic dialogue—texts which Acts is best understood in the light of; and the detailed study of any given device contributes to the better understanding of generic norms that a text engages with, whether to conform, subvert, parody, or anything else. The oracular device in Acts offers one important example of this principle.

### 1.2. *Question and Answer in Acts 1.6–8*

Oracles in ancient literature usually take a Question and Answer format. Although this is not always the case,<sup>9</sup> a question put to a divine figure would definitely take the reader into a rich realm of literary codes and conventions. Fontenrose catalogues over 500 oracles given in ancient literature by the Delphic Oracle alone, using sources varying from historical to entirely fictional,<sup>10</sup> and it is certain that the contemporary reader of Acts possessed a contextual framework that the modern reader simply does not have. The question the Apostles ask, ‘Οἱ μὲν οὖν συνελθόντες ἡρώτων αὐτὸν λέγοντες· κύριε, εἰ ἐν τῷ χρόνῳ τούτῳ ἀποκαθιστάνεις τὴν βασιλείαν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ’, is of a very particular sort: it is framed in a construction with two participles, and the verb ἐρωτάω is in the less common imperfect tense.<sup>11</sup> The cumulative effect of these three elements is to make the question seem drawn out; the imperfect tense of the verb itself may often be better translated ‘to urge’ or ‘to beseech’, with an almost iterative sense that implies continued asking, than simply ‘to ask’. This is particularly noteworthy in the NT, where there are only about 13 uses of the imperfect tense of this verb, almost all of which are better translated in this way.<sup>12</sup> When it comes to the

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Marianne Palmer Bonz, *The Past as Legacy: Luke-Acts and Ancient Epic* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 15–25, underlines the importance of truth claims made by the Epic genre; Clare K. Rothschild, *Luke-Acts and the Rhetoric of History: An Investigation of Early Christian Historiography* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 1–23, argues for an understanding that allows Acts to be classified among the Greek historians.

9 David Edward Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 52.

10 Joseph Eddy Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle, its Responses and Operations, with a Catalogue of Responses* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978).

11 Over 130 uses in the LXX and BGT, of which about 17 are imperfect, 60 aorist, and the rest are participles or simple future.

12 13 uses: Matt 15.23; 16.13; Mark 4.10; 7.26; 8.5; Luke 7.3; John 4.31, 40, 47; 9.15; 12.21; Acts 1.6; 3.3; 16.39. Of which only two are arguably better translated in the simple sense—Matt 16.13 and Mark 8.5. Of these two, only the latter seems to have an insuperable case for being translated in a manner that does not imply the iterative sense.

Lukan corpus, there are 22 uses,<sup>13</sup> of which only 4 are in the imperfect, and all clearly take an imperfect-type meaning.

Other than the one which is our present object, the other three are:

Luke 7.36:

Ἡρώτα δέ τις αὐτὸν τῶν Φαρισαίων ἵνα φάγη μετ' αὐτοῦ, καὶ εἰσελθὼν εἰς τὸν οἶκον τοῦ Φαρισαίου κατεκλίθη.

Acts 3.3:

ὃς ἰδὼν Πέτρον καὶ Ἰωάννην μέλλοντας εἰσιέναι εἰς τὸ ἱερόν, ἡρώτα ἐλεημοσύνην λαβεῖν.

And Acts 16.39:

καὶ ἐλθόντες παρεκάλεσαν αὐτοὺς καὶ ἐξαγαγόντες ἡρώτων ἀπελθεῖν ἀπὸ τῆς πόλεως.

All of these instances seem appropriate uses of the imperfect—the tense has an iterative value that suggests a question has not been asked just once, as would seem to be the case in the seven aorist instances. In Luke 7.36 the suggestion appears to be that Jesus went reluctantly with the Pharisee because of his persistence: the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees makes this quite plausible. In Luke 11.37 a Pharisee asks him a similar question in the simple present tense, but this construction is altogether different. The third time the imperfect is used by Luke it is placed in the mouth of a beggar—a situation in which an iterative value is quite natural. On the fourth occasion, the Philippians are asking Paul to leave, but are worried about having imprisoned a Roman citizen. In this context the imperfect, with its concomitant suggestion of reiteration, suggests that the people are not able to demand that he leaves, but are urging him from a position of weakness, rather like the beggar in Acts 3.3. Thus the use of this verb and this tense in Lukan narrative carries with it an iterative or at least conative value.

This verb combined with the two participles leads to an interpretation of the verse in which the Apostles are badgering Jesus, and he answers only because he has to: 'Having gathered together they were asking him, saying...'

In this context, Jesus gives them a very strange answer. While the latter half of the response dictates the missionary theme of the book, and also explains large parts of the plot structure, it must be noted that the first part of the answer, 'εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτούς· οὐχ ὑμῶν ἐστὶν γινῶναι χρόνους ἢ καιροὺς οὓς ὁ

<sup>13</sup> Luke: 4.38; 5.3; 7.3; 8.37; 9.45; 11.37; 14.18, 19, 32; 16.27; 19.31; 20.3; 22.68; 23.3; Acts 1.6; 3.3; 10.48; 16.39; 18.20; 23.18, 20.

πατήρ ἔθετο ἐν τῇ ἰδίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ, is far more esoteric and ambiguous. Furthermore, its position—syntactically connected to what is widely considered the key verse for outlining the direction of the narrative—suggests that it requires close attention.

The reluctance suggested by the construction of 1.6 in the context of oracular literature goes some way to explaining the reply: this is not a piece of advice or an instruction given by Jesus, but an ambiguous response to a persistent question, and this warns the reader not to accept the oracle at face value. The context—the question as to the restoration of Israel—suggests the interpretation ‘you will be my witnesses *to the Jews* in Judaea, Samaria, and *the whole Diaspora*’. But what it explicitly says amounts merely to a geographical reference, and could include or exclude any nation or group.

Tannehill sees the response as entirely unambiguous. This interpretation is almost inevitable given his strong view of the unity of Luke–Acts: ‘...(Luke 24.49; Acts 1.4, 8); the universal scope of the mission, which begins in the Jewish homeland and reaches out to the entire world (Luke 24.47; Acts 1.8)’.<sup>14</sup> It is by reading Acts through Luke that he sees ‘ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς’ as equivalent to ‘εἰς πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, ἀρξάμενοι ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλήμ’, which in semantic terms is always a problematic assumption. The Gospel reference is certainly inclusive, but Acts is more ambiguous at this point—either a Diasporic or a non-Diasporic interpretation is possible.

### 1.3. *The Trouble with the Answer*

Pervo and Haenchen also agree that Acts 1.8b is universal in scope, as does Parsons.<sup>15</sup> None of these scholars sees any ambiguity in Jesus’ response. And if scholars can so easily conclude that this outline explicitly includes the mission to the Gentiles, one might reasonably expect the Apostles to have understood it similarly, but this is not the case. The vision in Acts 10 seems to cause Peter, who was ostensibly in attendance when Jesus told them to tell the Gentiles the good news, considerable confusion. He in turn has to work hard to explain the events of Acts 10 to the Church elders.

Very little is made of this discrepancy between the explicit outlining of a universal mission by Jesus in 1.8, and the confusion of first Peter and then the Jerusalem church in Acts 10. Pervo thinks the vision refers directly to the dietary requirements of believers,<sup>16</sup> though this seems to be dispelled by Peter himself in 10.28 when he interprets ‘cleanliness’ as referring to people rather than to food—suggesting at least a metonymic, if not entirely metaphoric,

<sup>14</sup> Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, 2.11.

<sup>15</sup> Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, 28; Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 144; Parsons, *Acts*, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, 269.

interpretation. Neither Parsons nor Haenchen discuss the contradiction at all, and yet there is clearly an issue: if in Acts 1 the mission is to include Gentiles, why does God have to reiterate this so firmly in Acts 10, and why does Peter have to explain himself to the Church? The simplest explanation is that nobody expected this inclusion, and the consensus was that newcomers had to become ritually clean in the traditional sense. If the reader had, up this point, made that assumption, what occurs here would make sense. Acts 11.19 even goes so far as to suggest something of this sort: 'Οἱ μὲν οὖν διασπαρέντες ἀπὸ τῆς θλίψεως τῆς γενομένης ἐπὶ Στεφάνῳ διήλθον ἕως Φοινίκης καὶ Κύπρου καὶ Ἀντιοχείας μηδενὶ λαλοῦντες τὸν λόγον εἰ μὴ μόνον Ἰουδαίοις'.

All of this suggests that the answer Jesus gives is not as clear as has been thought. When one considers the number of oracles with ambiguous answers in ancient literature,<sup>17</sup> the contemporary reader would certainly be able to decode the conventions that surround this literary device.

The evasive answer to the question 'is this the time for the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel?', has a (contextually) natural and a (contextually) less likely, but *syntactically* equally viable interpretation. The reader knows these must exist, and the suspense is created by wondering what the true meaning of the oracle will be and what trouble will be caused by the Apostles' misinterpretation.

The device disturbs the linear course of the narrative to generate interest—the implied reader knows there is a dissonance between the outcome projected by the oracle and the outcome expected by the Apostles, and possibly even as known in real-world history. The reader uses the contextual framework of oracular literature to begin to configure the narrative, and thus to interpret it.

For the sake of convenience let us label the two interpretations of the oracle as follows:

**Interpretation 1:** The ostensible interpretation, in which the Apostles are witnesses to the Diaspora all over the world.

**Interpretation 2:** The secret, correct interpretation, in which the Apostles are witnesses all over the world, but Jewish rejection will prevent the restoration of the Kingdom.

After receiving the oracle and being convinced of the first interpretation, the Apostles receive the Holy Spirit and begin to preach. Interpretation 1 looks sound. This is what one expects and is part of a tradition in which the recipient of the oracle obeys its advice and acts accordingly. It is the law of narrative, however, that such behaviour will backfire; in fact whenever it appears that everything is going well and nothing untoward seems likely to occur, especially early in

<sup>17</sup> Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle*, 437–8, lists more than 60 out of about 425. There are no ambiguous responses in historical oracles (75 according to his criteria, which we will discuss later).



a narrative, we know that there will be trouble.<sup>18</sup> The projected outcome is on course even though the reader is aware it cannot come about—a juxtaposition that naturally evokes excitement. The Apostles enjoy success in Jerusalem and a big increase in numbers. The resistance of the Jews gradually increases, until eventually Stephen is martyred in Acts 7. This persecution at the hands of the Jews forces a re-evaluation of the oracle, the key to which is evident:

Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ διωγμὸς μέγας ἐπὶ τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τὴν ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις, πάντες δὲ διεσπάρησαν κατὰ τὰς χώρας τῆς Ἰουδαίας καὶ Σαμαρείας πλὴν τῶν ἀποστόλων. (Acts 8.1)

This verse shows that the message has now spread not just further in Judaea, but also into Samaria<sup>19</sup>—and this happens precisely because of Jewish resistance. The statement is followed some time later by Peter in 12.11: ‘νὺν οἶδα ἀληθῶς ὅτι ἐξαπέστειλεν [ὁ] κύριος τὸν ἄγγελον αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐξείλατό με ἐκ χειρὸς Ἡρώδου καὶ πάσης τῆς προσδοκίας τοῦ λαοῦ τῶν Ἰουδαίων’. These words come at the end point of the Judaea mission, and ‘...καὶ πάσης τῆς προσδοκίας τοῦ λαοῦ τῶν Ἰουδαίων’ formally closes it. The Samaritan portion of the mission began with Stephen’s stoning, and the Judean portion ends with this final persecution of Peter, in which he implicates the Jews.

#### 1.4. *Jewish Mission: Ups and Downs*

The narrative is structured in such a way that the Jewish mission is bound to fail. But in the first half of Acts, where the oracular response is still understood to be working itself out directly through Interpretation 1, the impression of successful preaching to the Jews is initially strong. Gerhard Krodel, for example, states that the

presence of these Jews from every nation under heaven [symbolizes] the beginning of the gathering of the scattered tribes of Israel and thus the restoration of the kingdom to Israel before the parousia.<sup>20</sup>

This restoration, however, does not occur in the narrative of Acts; a fact that makes one wonder as to why it is implied by this scene. Krodel is not incorrect in theorising that the suggestion of restoration is present, but rather in failing to

18 See, for example, Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1998) 116–17.

19 While I do not wish to go into speculative arguments on whether the Samaritans were considered to be Gentiles or not, James Alan Montgomery, *The Samaritans: The Earliest Jewish Sect—Their History, Theology, and Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1968) 154–64, especially 156–7, provides an interesting survey of the evidence. Reading between the lines of Josephus, he argues persuasively that the relationship was unique.

20 Gerhard A. Krodel, *Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 77; Gary Gilbert, ‘The List of Nations in Acts 2: Roman Propaganda and the Lukan Response’, *JBL* 121.3 (2002) 507.

understand that the suggestion is part of a *refracted authorial intention* to suggest that the plot is following Interpretation 1, while planning already to subvert it. If the course charted by Interpretation 1 was followed to its completion, the narrative would be poor reading.

Up until Acts 10 the Apostles are under the impression that the oracular response was clear, that the whole Diaspora will be restored to Israel, and that it is their task to spread the good news to all Jews, as Acts 11.19 explicitly states. Non-fulfilment seems a real possibility at the point of Stephen's martyrdom, but here we see that the disciples had continued to preach to Jews wherever they found themselves. The interpretative possibilities therefore remain open until Acts 10, where the vision to Peter represents a significant plot-twist, and the reader is finally given a tangible sign of movement toward Interpretation 2.

Lawrence Wills, discussing the depiction of the Jews in Acts, argues that the consistent pattern of evangelism in the latter half of the narrative is:

Initial missionary success → resistance by Jews → movement → new success<sup>21</sup>

He supports this hypothesis with the fact that the rare instances of Gentile resistance (16.11–40; 17.18–18.1; 19.24–20.1) do not directly lead to new missionary success.<sup>22</sup> The narratives of Gentile resistance are also longer (excluding speeches), and the trouble on both occasions is attributed to that most base of human motives, greed.<sup>23</sup> The salient point is that Gentile resistance is explained at length, while Jewish resistance is seldom explained in the latter half of Acts.

What Wills argues is in effect that the portrayal of Jewish resistance serves mostly to demonstrate that through divine providence the continued rejection of the Jews continually causes success and expansion for the mission to the Gentiles. He observes:

missionary successes among the Jews do occur, but these do not inaugurate the blessings of the end of time; the *opposition* of the Jews is what inaugurates the successes of the worldwide Gentile mission.<sup>24</sup>

Wills's article suggests that there is a continuing plot structure in which the Apostles preach to the Jews, but failure in that mission leads directly to success among the Gentiles. This implies that the oracle itself, in encouraging the Apostles to believe that the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel is imminent, and therefore to preach to the Jews, is subtly manipulating the Apostles into unknowingly furthering the Divine intention.

21 Lawrence M. Wills, 'The Depiction of the Jews in Acts', *JBL* 110.4 (1991) 639.

22 Wills, 'The Depiction of the Jews in Acts', 643–4.

23 Wills, 'The Depiction of the Jews in Acts', 649.

24 Wills, 'The Depiction of the Jews in Acts', 640–3.

It is worth noting that Jewish rejection of God's message is not solely a Christian ideological construct, but one with foundation among the Jews of the period themselves. David Moessner discusses this in connection with the work of O. H. Steck, and reaches some interesting conclusions for Acts that are worth quoting in full here:

[O. H. Steck amassed] overwhelming evidence that one conceptual canopy of Israel's past and the role and fate of her prophets within that history covered all its literature from 200 BCE to 100 CE:

- A. The history of Israel is one long, unending story of a 'stiff-necked' and disobedient people;
- B. God sent his messengers, the prophets, to mediate his will (i.e. the Law), to instruct and admonish them in this will, and to exhort them to repentance lest they bring upon themselves judgment and destruction;
- C. Nevertheless, Israel en masse rejected these prophets, even persecuting and killing them out of their stubborn 'stiff-neckedness';
- D. Therefore, Israel's God had 'rained' destruction upon them in 722 and 587 BCE and would destroy them in a similar way if they did not hearken to his word.

This understanding encompasses the wide divergences of the multi-hued Judaism of the intertestamental and early NT period and is an inner Jewish critique of its own history that can vary widely in tone and application. For instance, how faithfulness to the covenant law should be expressed or which group in fact in the past may have constituted a faithful remnant, etc. are all operative within this unifying view. The author of Luke-Acts shares this orientation to Israel's past but with a major modification: the cycle of stubborn disobedience has been definitively broken by the coming of the prophet like Moses, the Anointed One, Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>25</sup>

Whether or not Steck's work can be accepted uncritically, the fact that Jewish history can be seen as presenting itself in this way suggests that this narrative construction sits within a specific cultural context. The rhetoric of Acts is one that plays upon Jewish self-perception, and implies that the rejection of Jesus is a national catastrophe that will bring about their destruction. It is even possible that the narrative implies that the destruction of Jerusalem itself was the consequence of this rejection.

## 2. Paul's Role

### 2.1. *Arbiter of the Divine Will*

Paul's role in Acts is very interesting when viewed through the lens of this device. The reader has known from 9.15 that he will be God's chosen instrument

<sup>25</sup> Moessner, "The Christ Must Suffer": New Light on the Jesus-Peter, Stephen, Paul Parallels in Luke-Acts', *NovT* 28.3 (1986) 225-6, citing O. H. Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten* (WMANT 23; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1967) 60-80.

to both Gentiles and Jews: 'εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος· πορεύου, ὅτι σκεῦος ἐκλογῆς ἐστίν μοι οὗτος τοῦ βασιτάσαι τὸ ὄνομά μου ἐν ὧν τῶν ἐθνῶν τε καὶ βασιλέων υἱὼν τε Ἰσραήλ'. But since this remark is made to Ananias rather than Paul, the reader has no idea as to whether he knows of his divinely ordained role until Acts 22.15: 'ἔσθι μάρτυς αὐτῷ πρὸς πάντας ἀνθρώπους ὧν ἐώρακας καὶ ἤκουσας', by which time any suspense is long gone. God's comment to Ananias is also interesting in that it says nothing of success or failure in either the Jewish or Gentile mission, and yet manages to sound rather triumphal—a triumphalism that centres around Paul rather than around the results of any particular event.

In a sense, Paul stands outside of the oracular framework: he was not present for the oracle, and thus never misinterprets it. Yet he is the first to instigate Interpretation 2. He also enjoys a knowledge that even the reader does not always share (he knows his role is to the Gentiles but the reader is left wondering whether this is the case). The reader does not have all the available information, and this allows the narrative to retain interest while adding depth to characterisation.<sup>26</sup> Luke utilises the technique in order to entertain, but also because he wants Paul to be the centre of readerly interest.

Paul brings about the mission to the ends of the earth but is quite clearly—one might almost say deliberately—not the instigator of either Gentile conversion or Gentile mission. As is seen above, Peter converts Cornelius before Paul has had any involvement with converting non-Jews. In Acts 11, Luke carefully—even awkwardly—constructs the narrative to ensure that Paul is not involved with the first large-scale Gentile mission, which is instigated by men from 'Cyprus and Cyrene' (11.20), and is approved by Barnabas (11.23), and even by God (11.21). Barnabas then goes to Tarsus, finds Saul, and brings him back to Antioch, from where the first 'missionary journey' begins.

Even then, however, Paul's involvement is carefully managed. Paul and Barnabas are set aside by God: 'ἀφορίσατε δὴ μοι τὸν Βαρναβᾶν καὶ Σαῦλον εἰς τὸ ἔργον ὃ προσκέκλημαι αὐτούς', but He does not reveal his intention in terms of either Jews or Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas then go and preach in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch—which implies that they interpret the 'work' as evangelism to the Jews.

The scene at Pisidian Antioch builds up very carefully. One notes that while Luke appears to have mentioned Gentiles in this section, both of these references were qualified: the first is used by Paul in 13.16: 'ἄνδρες Ἰσραηλῖται καὶ οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν, ἀκούσατε'. The second is 13.43: 'ἠκολούθησαν πολλοὶ τῶν Ἰουδαίων καὶ τῶν σεβομένων προσηλύτων τῷ Παύλῳ καὶ τῷ

<sup>26</sup> A technique that is employed in the OT, and which Robert Alter calls 'the art of reticence'. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981) 114–30.

Βαρναβᾶ'. The word 'ἔθνη' is carefully circumnavigated. It is only after considerable trouble from the Jews that Paul declares in 13.46–47:

παρρησιασάμενοί τε ὁ Παῦλος καὶ ὁ Βαρναβᾶς εἶπαν· ὑμῖν ἦν ἀναγκαῖον πρῶτον λαληθῆναι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ· ἐπειδὴ ἀπωθεῖσθε αὐτὸν καὶ οὐκ ἄξιους κρίνετε ἑαυτοὺς τῆς αἰωνίου ζωῆς, ἰδοὺ στρεφόμεθα εἰς τὰ ἔθνη, οὕτως γὰρ ἐντέταλται ἡμῖν ὁ κύριος· τέθεικά σε εἰς φῶς ἐθνῶν τοῦ εἶναί σε εἰς σωτηρίαν ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς. (Acts 13.46–47)

This of course opens the third phase of the oracle by using the same words as Jesus himself: something that Peter did not do in his interaction with Cornelius, who resided in Samaria, and was therefore representative of the second rather than the third stage of the oracle.

So Paul is innocent of any allegation of instigating the Gentile mission, but instead is awarded credit for bringing about the final stage of the prophecy, despite his being absent when it was delivered.

## 2.2. *A Final Twist*

These early twists—the rejection in Jerusalem and the expansion to Gentiles—are not the most significant. The irony of the narrative is that the Apostles accomplish the opposite of what they wish to happen, precisely by trying to bring it about, yet in perfect fulfilment of the oracle—the sort of reversal that Marianne Palmer Bonz considers important to Epic.<sup>27</sup>

Jewish rejection of the message continues almost entirely unabated, and eventually, after being an instrument for pushing Paul and the mission all over the Mediterranean basin, it produces a final, bitter-sweet twist (Acts 28.28): 'Γνωστὸν οὖν ἔστω ὑμῖν, ὅτι τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ἀπεστάλη τὸ σωτήριον τοῦ θεοῦ, αὐτοῖς καὶ ἀκούσονται.'

The καὶ is semantically ambiguous and makes both 'they also will listen' and 'and *they* will listen' possible. But the context favours the latter—the Isaiah prophecy states quite plainly that the Jews are not listening, so Paul declares his intention to take his message to the Gentiles, because *they* will listen.<sup>28</sup> This twist represents the climax, and effectively declares the end of the Jewish mission. The reader has been forced to reassess again, and this time in a way that may genuinely surprise her—it is a brilliant ending: the oracle is fully understood at last, and it had never included the Jews. It does not nullify the promise to restore the Kingdom to Israel, but it has cancelled the Apostles' obligation to try to bring that about: when they did try, they only brought about the opposite. It is Paul who makes this final decision on Jewish mission, but then, he has always had the Divine prerogative in mind in a way that the Apostles did not.

<sup>27</sup> See for example, Bonz, *The Past as Legacy*, 21, 190.

<sup>28</sup> Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, 680.

### 2.3. *The Third Attempt*

Not that Paul's decision is made lightly. An interesting element that must be considered here is that Paul's declaration in Rome is actually the third of its sort. The first (13.46–47) is discussed above; the other occurs at 18.6:

ἀντιτασσομένων δὲ αὐτῶν καὶ βλασφημούντων ἐκτιναζόμενος τὰ ἱμάτια  
εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτούς· τὸ αἶμα ὑμῶν ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν ὑμῶν· καθαρὸς ἐγὼ ἀπὸ  
τοῦ νῦν εἰς τὰ ἔθνη πορεύσομαι.

Dibelius makes the astute observation that the three statements take place in Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome, and as such represent each of the chief regions of the Pauline mission.<sup>29</sup> Rome, then, is the final region, and equates to the last chance for the Jews to believe the Gospel. Tannehill has argued, 'nothing prevents us from understanding the announcement in 28.28 as applying to Rome and leaving open the possibility of preaching to Jews everywhere',<sup>30</sup> but there is nowhere left to preach; at least, not in a narrative sense. In each region, Paul has tried, has failed, and has pronounced his intention to go the Gentiles instead. Tannehill does note from Acts 28.22 that 'it is recognized that such resistance is appearing everywhere'.<sup>31</sup> The climactic ending does gain special significance from the fact of its happening in Rome, but also from the fact that the last of the three great doors has closed. Paul persists in Jewish mission until there were no other options, and then, with scriptural support, accepts the inevitable as God's will.

## 3. Support from Oracular Literature

### 3.1. *Legendary/Historical Oracles*

The most obvious parallel in oracular literature is that of Oedipus, who asks the oracle about the identity of his parents and is told 'Do not go home, or you will kill your father and marry your mother'. Oedipus takes the oracle's advice, not realising that home is in reality Thebes, not Corinth, because his parents are actually Jocasta and Laius, a fact the oracle does not reveal. This leads to him unknowingly killing his father, before he solves the riddle of the sphinx and is given his mother as wife. In this example the oracle not only governs the plot of various plays by Aeschylus and Sophocles, but also produces much of the meaning found in these great works. The prophecy to Jocasta that leads to Oedipus's adoption by the king and queen of Corinth in the first instance functions in a very similar fashion.

29 Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. H. Greeven; London: SCM, 1956) 150.

30 Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, 2.350.

31 Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, 2.350.

Another well-known example is that of Croesus king of Lydia in Herodotus, in which the king asks whether he should attack Persia, and the response is 'if you attack Persia you will destroy a great nation'.<sup>32</sup> That nation was of course Lydia, an interpretation that Croesus does not consider until it is too late.

These oracles, however, are given with the motive of divine retribution against ancestors,<sup>33</sup> and while this is an important element of the ambiguous oracle, it is not one that can be explored in relation to the Jews in anything other than a speculative way. In any case, the oracles do not always have this underlying motive. Examples include:

- The oracle to Kylon that he must attack Athens at 'Zeus's greatest festival'. He misinterprets the festival and fails in his bid to take over the city.<sup>34</sup>
- The Heraklids ask how they might conquer the Peloponnesos, and are told they will be given victory if they go through the narrows. They misinterpret the oracle, attack through the wrong narrows, and are defeated.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, they enquire as to when they should return from Marathon, and are told to wait for the third harvest. They misinterpret this to mean the third year rather than the third generation, and suffer defeat again.
- Philip of Macedon asks how he might vanquish the Persians, and is told: 'Wreathed is the Bull. All is done. There is also the one who will smite him'. Philip assumes this is favourable to him, with Persia being the Bull. Instead, the oracle actually refers to Philip's assassination at a sacrificial ritual.<sup>36</sup>

These three examples also illustrate that most ambiguous responses are preserved in legendary or quasi-historical literature, with fictional responses comprising only 15 of Fontenrose's catalogue of 500. Most of these responses are reported, or at least cited, in a way very different from the manner that I am claiming lies behind Acts. On the other hand, Fontenrose argues that there are no reliable historical examples of ambiguous oracular responses, and that the ambiguous response is by its nature associated with myth and legend. What all of this tells us is that the literary culture surrounding oracles does appear to differentiate between the strictly historical reporting of mundane oracles and the more literary/legendary ambiguous responses of the sort used in Acts. It leaves open the question as to whether there was an identifiable framework by which the reader of Acts could decode the text.

<sup>32</sup> 1.53.

<sup>33</sup> Laius is punished for the rape of Chrysippus, while Croesus is being punished on behalf of Gyges, his ancestor, for stealing the Lydian throne.

<sup>34</sup> Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle*, 68; Rosalind Thomas, *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991) 272–81.

<sup>35</sup> Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle*, 68. Apollodorus 2.8.2.

<sup>36</sup> Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle*, 67, 337. Diodorus Siculus 16.91.2.

There is also one example which offers an insight from contemporary literature—that of Josephus, who in *War* 6.312–313, says:

The thing that most encouraged them toward war was an ambiguous oracle that was found in their ancient writings, that at that time someone from their country will rule the earth. This they took to apply to themselves, and many of the wise men were deceived in their judgement about what was revealed. For the oracle concerned the government of Vespasian, who was proclaimed Emperor in Judea.

Josephus claims that it was an oracle in their own scriptures (probably Num 24.17–19) that gave the Jews the confidence to fight, and thus led them to their disastrous fate. Josephus writes history, and like Herodotus in the Croesus episode, does not attempt to build suspense in his narrative.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, the idea of the ambiguous oracle is definitely present.

### 3.2. *Literary Oracles*

For readers of the OT the most obvious example of a device of this sort is the vision of Joseph. Joseph tells his brothers the dream he has had, and their attempting to prevent its fulfilment actually brings it to fruition. The vision or dream is one of many manifestations of this device. The vow in the story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11 is another.

As well as the obvious examples from the Greek Epics, the device is preserved in the more contemporary genre of the novels. The example in Xenophon's *Ephesiaca* is not the most subtle, though it is used as an ambiguous oracle, in the sense that misinterpretation leads to the development of the plot. The device also occurs in Heliodorus 1.31:

'Thyamis, I deliver to you this maiden; you will have her and have her not, you will be a wrongdoer and will slay your guest; yet she will not be slain'. The effect of this vision was to put him in a state of perplexity, in which he kept turning its indications this way and that, as he tried to make out their meaning. Tiring at length of this, he shaped the solution to suit his own desire. The words 'you will have her and have her not' he supposed to mean 'as a woman, and no longer a virgin'; and 'you will slay' he took to signify the wounding to end virginity—which would not be fatal to Chariclea. This was the sense in which he construed his dream, according to the promptings of his passion.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See Maren R. Niehoff, 'Two Examples of Josephus' Narrative Technique in His "Rewritten Bible"', *JSJ* 27.1 (1996) 35, for other examples of this in Josephus. Niehoff argues that Josephus alleviates tension surrounding God's action as part of a rhetoric that depicts God as consistently righteous.

<sup>38</sup> 1.18–19. This translation: Heliodorus of Emesa, *Ethiopian Story* (trans. Walter Lamb; New York: Dutton, 1961) 19–20.



Thyamis's misinterpretation governs the development of the plot for some time to come, but does not govern the entire plot—there is, one finds in novels, a great variety in the significance of various oracles. For example, Achilles Tatius has Clitipho dream:

I had a dream in which my lower parts were fused up to the navel with those of my bride, while from there we had separate upper bodies. A huge, terrifying woman with a savage countenance appeared: her eyes were bloodshot, her cheeks rugged, and her hair made of snakes. She was wielding a sickle in her right hand, and a torch in the other. This creature attacked me with a furious passion: raising her sickle she brought it down on my loins, where the two bodies were joined, and lopped off the bride.<sup>39</sup>

This dream does not appear to give enough information to direct the plot in specific terms, and neither does Clitipho, though filled with apprehension by the vision, use it explicitly as a guide to future actions. Nonetheless it serves to add tension to the immediate narrative, and has obvious implications that are resonant until the final reuniting of the lovers.

The sophistic novels make use of another device that directs the plot from beginning to end; the *ekphrasis*, in which the interpretation of a picture (in the two extant examples, Longus and Achilles Tatius) provides a narrative framework. In Achilles Tatius, the *ekphrasis* creates a bivalent interpretative framework for the behaviour of Leucippe:

'Selene riding on a bull' clearly points to a description at the very beginning of the novel which is of particular interest for us: on a votive picture in the temple of the Phoenician love-goddess Astarte in Sidon, a girl is shown, riding on a bull over the water towards Crete. The girl can be easily identified as Europa, being abducted by the Zeus-bull—and this is also the reading of the anonymous I-narrator of the frame story. Europa is thus another traveller connected to our heroine. But at the same time, the depicted girl displays quite an active behaviour, for she seems to control the bull by one of its horns or sail on him like on a ship, using her peplos as a sail. This, and the context the picture is set in, rather suggest the identification with Astarte—the scene therefore showing her as she defeats her partner Baal, often depicted as a bull, on her own territory the sea.<sup>40</sup>

The sophistic style may well have included such devices normatively within the genre, and this can be seen as a development arising from the dialogue of

39 1.3. This translation: Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* (trans. Tim. Whitmarsh; Oxford: Oxford University, 2003) 6.

40 Helen Morales, *Vision and Narrative in Achilles Tatius' Leucippe and Clitophon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004) 37–8.

second sophistic intellectual culture and the literary conventions pre-existing in the period regarding oracles and a proleptic plot-structure.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has explored at some length Acts 1.6–8, seeking out literary conventions that might help us configure the narrative in a similar manner to its contemporary readers. The study investigated the framework created by the device we have termed the ambiguous oracle, and by looking at the literary tradition behind oracles, found what appears to be a clear plot-device, which has precedent in the period and which configures the narrative and generates interest.

What does this mean for the interpretation of Acts? Theologically and soteriologically, the device no doubt has ramifications that could be explored in a number of ways. Here I want to look at what this means for the configuration of the narrative by contemporary readers, who may have automatically understood this device and used it as a guide to the text. They would have interpreted the actions of the Apostles and the Jerusalem church through it, as well as taking in a Lukan perspective on Paul's special role in the early Church.

The literary device adds to the argument that this is not purely a historical narrative (though it by no means undermines its historicity). Rather, the ambiguous oracle serves to provide narrative interest and echo classical and contemporary literature.

Despite the very Jewish beginnings of the Christian Church, it becomes a mainly non-Jewish congregation, and according to Luke, this was according to the Divine will. If the Jewish Apostles focused on the Jewish mission, this did serve the Divine agenda, but in the opposite way to which they expected or hoped.

Finally, we recall that J. Bradley Chance argued that Acts does not use the oracle device in the same way as Xenophon, because Acts is an historical rather than a fictional work. Using his own line of argument, we would now be forced to say that since it does use this device in a way similar to the *Ephesiaca* and other fictional texts, in that it influences the decision-making of the characters, particularly through misinterpretation, Acts is more fiction than history. But personally, I would not jump to this conclusion. The device certainly shows the hallmarks of fiction, but as we have already hinted, the border between the two genres has never been as clear as we would like to think. Instead, the conclusion of this paper can only be provisional—through this device Acts exhibits a significant degree of internal coherence that is configurable according to the laws of narrative rather than of history, and this suggests more of the type of authorial control we associate with Greek fiction than with a Hellenistic history.